



# Liberty Nature Center



**A** BARRED OWL peers from behind the metal bars of its plastic carrier at the Liberty Nature Center in Somerset. “This one has a head injury. Most likely from a car accident,” explained the center’s executive director, Charlotte Simpson.

The owl is just one of approximately 200 injured birds that come through the center’s doors each year in need of help.

Liberty’s two full-time employees and mainly high school age volunteers care for the animals at a 28-acre site near Lake Cumberland. Their focus is the rehabilitation of large birds of prey while teaching others the importance of Kentucky’s native wildlife.

“Sometimes I get a call at 2 a.m., and it’s a Fish and Wildlife conservation officer saying they’ve got an injured bird,” said Liberty Nature Center Founder and CEO Frances Carter. “All the game wardens in the area have our number.”

Carter said most of the birds there were hit by a car or caught in a fence.

The Liberty Nature Center belongs to the National Wildlife Rehabilitation Association and the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council. These groups certify the nature center as a wildlife rehabilitator and provide for a network for acquiring injured birds.

Birds of prey that can’t be released back to the wild are used for educational programs. Volunteers visit schools with the birds for presentations to students.

A female bald eagle named Allegiant now stars in these presentations. It arrived from North Carolina, where a veterinarian at a raptor center performed surgery on its fractured wing. The eagle did not make a full recovery, however, as it could no longer fly extended distances.

The Liberty Nature Center accepted Allegiant and trained it to perform short flights at educational programs across the state.

## A place for injured birds to call home

Story and photos by  
Lyndsey Williams

The center didn’t always have the room and resources it does now for birds like Allegiant. The Liberty Nature Center has its roots in a Casey County classroom, where Carter taught high school biology.

It all started in 1987, when Carter’s nephew found a great horned owl hung in a fence. Carter called local Conservation Officer Randy Wilson about the bird and asked if the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources could take care of it.

“He said the department didn’t have the facilities,” Carter recalled. “There really weren’t many rehabbers at the time, so Randy asked me if I could take care of it.”

Carter only declined because she didn’t have the necessary federal permit to care for the injured bird. Wilson took the owl and vowed to help Carter get her permit.

A few months later, she received a call from Somerset veterinarian Bruce Jasper. “I’ve got your permit – come and get it,” he said.

Although the owl that her nephew found did not survive, Jasper had another bird in need of a home. “Come get this great horned owl in my lobby that’s scaring all the animals,” he told Carter. “It’s driving the dogs and cats crazy.”

Carter enlisted her high school students to help care for the owl and to build cages for new arrivals. In 1993, Pulaski County opened Southwestern High School. Carter took a job as a biology teacher at the new school and moved her raptor rehabilitation program to the adjoining county.

At Southwestern, they were known as the nation’s only raptor program on a high school campus. High school students served exclusively as volunteers for the program.

Eager to grow the program, the staff embarked on a fundraising campaign to move the facility. In 2013, the group raised more than \$300,000 to purchase land and

**The outdoor enclosure is a space where birds can exercise. It features a double door system so they cannot escape.**



**Ann Jacobs, 15, stands with vulture Cody's wing over her head.**



build a 3,000-square-foot wildlife care center capable of housing 15 birds inside. Outside are an additional 10 enclosures, along with a picnic shelter and stage for presentations.

Although the program is no longer on campus, nature center staff still rely heavily on high school volunteers. The program is open to area students in seventh through twelfth grades. Openings also exist for college interns and adult mentors.

"We really depend on our volunteers," Carter said. Volunteers assist with daily work at the facility, including weighing all the birds, monitoring their food intake, cleaning their enclosures and caring for the animals. Volunteers usually work up to 3½ hours a day, and sometimes longer on weekends.

While the high school students don't get class credit, they do earn volunteer hours. Sometimes these hours count toward academic clubs. The work also bolsters college applications. But for most, the experience is more than just counting hours.

"It's all of our passions. I'd like to become a veterinarian, so volunteering here gives me experience with animals as well as an opportunity to give back to the community," said 15-year-old Ann Jacobs, a volunteer for the past four years.

Second-year volunteer Kinley Spencer said the work is hard, especially in winter. "You'll be using the water hose to clean the enclosures and the water just freezes on the ground," she said.

Frozen water can't be ig-

nored. Spencer noted ice is dangerous for birds because the shards can cut them. "We have to use a heat lamp to keep the ice away," explained the 14-year-old volunteer.

Staff at the Liberty Nature Center have plans for growth beyond just helping raptors. Current projects include a mammal rehabilitation enclosure for deer, foxes, bobcats, raccoons, squirrels and other native wildlife.

Besides the mammal enclosure, the center's staff also has plans for an interactive nature trail, where guests can get a hands-on approach to learning about the environment and native wildlife.

The Liberty Center is closed to visitation during the winter. It generally reopens for public tours by late May. Tour times are 3:30-6 p.m. Monday through Friday; noon-6 p.m. Saturday; and 1-5 p.m. Sunday.

Each visitor older than 2 is encouraged to make a small donation of \$5 to help the center pay its expenses.

The center also offers five-day camps in spring for kids in first through fifth grades.

For more information, visit the center's website at [www.libertynaturecenter.org](http://www.libertynaturecenter.org) or follow them on Facebook. Visitors may also call (606) 679-WILD (9453) for more information. ■



**Kinley Spencer, 14, weighs a red-shouldered hawk.**